



Halstead Town Council Annual report by Town Clerk May 2021 - May 2022

As in the previous year, despite the intrusions cause by the pandemic, lockdowns, testing and isolating, Halstead Town Council has continued to do its work and carry out its duties as a council. This year councillors have been meeting remotely only for working groups. Full Council meetings and committee meetings have been conducted face-to-face following government guidance. All officers have been able to return to working in the office. There has been an officer in the office every working day, and the phone has been answered throughout. There has been no noticeable disruption in service. The continuation of remote meetings has allowed attendance at some meetings which would otherwise have been difficult to travel to, for both officers and councillors, and this may prove to be a good way forward.

Members and officers

At the virtual Annual Town Council meeting in May, Cllr Mick Radley was elected Chairman of Halstead Town Council for the second time, with Cllr Dave Gronland as Deputy Chairman, for the second time. Finance has been managed this year by Cllr Peter Claydon with Cllr Dave Gronland as deputy. Planning has been managed by Cllr David Hume, with Cllr Jackie Pell as deputy. This was the last remotely held meeting of the Full Council. From 7 May 2021, all Council meetings and committee meetings have had to be conducted face-to-face in Queens Hall, with a limited number of members of the public attending, everyone appropriately socially distanced. There is an ongoing petition to challenge the government's decision not to allow council business to be conducted through remote meetings, which HTC has supported, as this can provide protection to vulnerable councillors. Caretaking at the hall is now managed by 2 part-time caretakers working alternate months. The finances at HTC have this year been managed by a freelance bookkeeper, who has brought efficiency and considerable experience to the job.

Champions

It has been almost impossible for most of the champions to engage with their topics this year, except for those involved with Open Spaces, and the police. The Open Spaces Action Plan has been fully considered and updated. In addition, the Open Spaces Champions have joined the EC2K cycle group, which is planning a cycle route from Kelvedon to Earls Colne, and now beyond to Halstead. They have also been very active in addressing the climate crisis. The Police Champions are planning to revive speedwatch in Halstead when enough volunteers come forward, and have been active in liaising with the police on incidents in Halstead.

Award scheme

Halstead Town Council now holds the Foundation, Quality and Gold awards in the Local Council award scheme. Halstead is one of only 6 councils in the whole of Essex to hold the

gold award. The Gold award last until 2025, which means that in 2022/4/5 we will need to think about updating all our policies and practices again. They are of course regularly reviewed, but at that time it would be good to introduce innovation again.

Council offices and Queens Hall

The team has continued to enjoy the new, more convenient and warm offices at Queens Hall. The Queens Hall has blossomed since the lifting of lockdown restrictions. Bookings are flooding in for all sorts of groups. The Flower club, Little City, the U3A, the model flying club, the Wine and social club have all returned, along with new clients such as The Big Sing, the Crafty ladies. TLC care homes have managed to continue with their training, and Provide, part of the NHS, regularly holds sessions. Queens Hall is also being used as a vaccination centre. In addition, the regular parties, for young and old are returning. The hall is busier than ever, proving its value as a community asset.

Finance

HTC endeavours to keep the precept for Halstead (the part of the Council tax collected by BDC and given to HTC to run the council) at a modest level, with a very moderate increase each year to keep in line with inflation. It was agreed at the Council meeting in January 2022 to raise the council tax in the financial year 2022/23 by 2% in line with inflation, which is equal to an increase of 0.94p per household in Band D Council Tax. In spite of the financial difficulties caused to all by the pandemic and by current inflation, it is felt prudent to maintain the practice of a small increase each year to enable the council to maintain its programme of activities and services for the coming year.

HTC has made a startling financial recovery over the past year. Once the hall reopened permanently, and other businesses in the town were able to open again, income has returned.

A new internal auditor was appointed in autumn 2019 and she has carried out all internal audits since then. External audits have been returned satisfactorily with no comment.

HTC has continued to explore the opportunities offered by direct credit online payments. All payments approved at Council meetings are now paid through direct credit, and this is not only much more efficient than writing a cheque and posting it, but it is also a much cheaper way to pay our suppliers.

Activities

The first few months of 21/22 were dogged by constant surges in Covid infections and consequent lockdowns. However, from July 21 onwards, the situation has improved enormously, with activities now almost returned to normal. Two bands played in the park and many residents were delighted to attend. HTC was able to restart its outings programme, and ran 2 modest trips in September and October 21, which were welcomed, and followed by a Christmas party for those who had taken part. In addition, the traditional Christmas Fayre and Lights switch-on took place, the spirits of the crowd barely dampened by the rain and cold. The Christmas Fayre is now organised under the aegis of the Town Council, to be managed by councillors. The torchlight procession was the busiest ever, and run with the

help of volunteers from Braintree District Council, and followed by the civic reception. The civic service on 3 April 22 was able to go ahead for the first time in 2 years, although the Mayor unfortunately was struck down by Covid and unable to enjoy his civic service, so the Vicechairman Cllr Gronland stood in for him..

Communication and digitisation

The Council continues to make use on a daily basis of the huge advantages offered by 21st century technology. Almost all communication is carried out by email, and councillors and staff have been able to attend many meetings, and training sessions via zoom or Microsoft teams, which has allowed them to be present at a wide range of events without any travel being involved. Training for the new car park machines, and for the use of MiPermit has all been carried out remotely but with good visual access.

Planning

HTC considers all planning applications made for Halstead through BDC. HTC is a consultee and therefore cannot make decisions, but can make recommendations. All sites destined for large developments have been handled with particular care for detail. The Council is sympathetic to the views of local residents where a development can be seen to overload the local infrastructure in schools, health care provision and parking, and on many occasions objects to such developments.

Car Parks

The 4 car parks in the town which are owned and managed by HTC, are well used, and the opportunity to buy permits is greatly appreciated by both residents and local businesses. These cost approximately half the cost of a daily ticket for the year. Permits were offered in the Chapel Street car park for the first time in 2018, and all 9 offered were taken up. A further 6 permits were offered at the Chapel Street car park from April 2019, and all have been taken up. It remains free to park in pay-and-display car parks after 15.00.

The Council has taken some big decisions over the past year relating to car parks. Firstly it realised, particularly when the public was reluctant to touch the car park machines during the pandemic, that it would need to provide other ways of paying. This has been solved by the installation of 2 modern machines which take cash and card payments. Strangely, the uptake of card payments has not been as great as expected, but no doubt will grow. The machines are highly efficient and free of breakdown. Secondly, the Council installed Mipermit payment by phone and app from 1 April 2022, which has been requested by some. With this comes the possibility of paying for permits through a portal linked to the HTC website. It is expected that this aspect of Mipermit will be up and running a little later in the year.

As part of its policy on working to combat the effects of climate change, HTC is still planning to install EV chargepoints in Chapel Street and also in Butler Road carpark. This is a complex and lengthy process, but progress has now been achieved, and installation is expected in 2022.

Allotments

There are approximately 200 allotments for rent in Halstead. There has been increased demand for these during recent lockdowns.

Churchyard walls

HTC has been working over the past few months to resolve an issue relating to the wall in St Andrews churchyard, which runs from Colchester Road to Parsonage Street behind the church. The wall is leaning and we were concerned about the next door garden. Fortunately, our structural engineer has said that the wall is not likely to fall, and has advised that the tree should come down and the wall be repaired, which we will do very soon.

Empire Theatre

HTC and the Empire Theatre Trust are working together on a National Lottery application to replace the roof, and the heating system.

Footbridge

The footbridge reopened in 2021, and is now fully functional as a quick way from Bridge Street to Sainsburys and Chapel Street. There is still some work to be done under water to the structure, and this will be done in summer 2022.

Infrastructure

The Council has been working with members of BDC, ECC and the local surgery to explore and contribute to the changing infrastructure needs of the town, in terms of schools, roads and health. This work on infrastructure forms part of the Action plan for the Council, which can be viewed on the HTC website. This work is ongoing, and will need the dogged determination of future councillors, and their understanding of the processes, in order for them to be able to assist in preparing the town for its growing population. The work now is being carried out by pairs of Champions working on different aspects of the infrastructure, and updating the Action Plan as progress is achieved.

Cllr Gabrielle Spray, BDC Member for the Colnes, addressed the August meeting of HTC to explain how the Local Plan would help in preventing undesirable developments.

BDC has now signed off for tender the plans for the regeneration of the Town Centre.

Discussion on the strategic lorry routes through Halstead and Sudbury was revived and it was agreed with Essex Highways that the recommended route for heavy traffic from the A12 would be changed so that heavy traffic would continue up as far as Colchester and then go to Sudbury from there.

Plans for the tennis courts at Courtaulds Sports Ground are under discussion, funded by S106 developer contributions.

HTC councillors now regularly attend meetings of the EC2K group which is attempting to establish a cycle route from Kelvedon to Halstead.

Halstead in Bloom

Halstead in Bloom has decided not to enter the Anglia in Bloom competition in 2022, as it feels lacking in manpower. HiB has been flourishing for the past 20 years, and some of its members feel no longer capable of doing the heavy work, involving kneeling and bending, and they have asked HTC for help. It is not yet clear what the outcome of this will be, but HTC will be doing its utmost to support the organisation which has brought floral splendour to Halstead for so long. The flowers characterise Halstead and are the main attraction for visitors, and everyone wants this to continue. This has also led to a review of the agreement between ECC, BDC, HTC and Halstead in Bloom. Cllr Siddall has helped HiB by organising at his own expense the removal of the oversized magnolia trees from the High Street.

Crime and Policing

Despite the pandemic HTC has continued its collaboration with the community policing team and the specials. CCTV now installed at Courtaulds and Butler Road car park has assisted the police on several occasions in tracking down criminals. The Council would like to restart Speedwatch patrols but so far there are not enough volunteers to do this.

Community Hub

The Council is continuing to maintain ongoing discussions with the Trustees for the Community hub, to work together on this project.

Grants

In 2021/22, £4000, was made available for local organisations. Almost all of this was given out in grants to a wide range of local organisations. In 2022, the amount available for grants has been increased to £6000. Applications must be with the Town Clerk by 30 June 2022.

Footnote on the impact of Covid 19

The Council continued to operate throughout the past year, as near to normal as possible. There has this year been a noticeable increase in activity as compared with last year, and the community is happy to be involved again.

The volunteer group in association with the Essex Welfare Service, has continued as a permanent volunteer force. The Chairman of the Council hosted a tea-party in the autumn of 2021, to thank volunteers delivering prescriptions, and working at the fridge. The council is still frequently contacted by the surgery and the pharmacy to help with delivery of prescriptions.

The community fridge has gone from strength to strength. Volunteers continue to come forward to make the daily collections of food from supermarkets, to clean and to sort. This year Eastlight Community Homes very generously funded the refurbishment of the inside, paying for materials to tile the walls and set up a new worktop. The work was done by volunteers. The fridge has become a permanent feature of the town, helping to prevent food waste, and providing a steady supply of wholesome food to anyone who would like it.

Sarah Greatorex

Town Clerk
May 2021